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Why Books (still) Matter

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Why Books (still) Matter

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“Where have all the books gone?” The tempting answer, however pat, is, “Nowhere. They’re all in our warehouse.”

Going simply by raw statistics, however, the question itself seems misguided.

R.R. Bowker recently estimated the number of new titles published in the United States in 2003 at 175,000, almost a 20% increase over the previous year. In just the four years since 1999, when 119,000 books were published, new title output in this country has increased by half. As anyone in the publishing, bookselling, and book review industry will tell you, the problem seems not to be that there aren’t enough books, but that there are vastly too many.

Rather than suggest a healthy book business, this explosive growth is arguably an indication of its core weakness. Increasingly, publishers are having to do more with less, to publish ever larger numbers of titles simply to keep up. And, while certain technologies such as digital printing and print-on-demand have enabled us to realize sales and satisfy readers whose requests for some titles would not so long ago have been met with “out of stock indefinitely” notices, these technological advances have not compensated for the steady contraction of the institutional library market for academic books.

At **Oxford University Press (OUP)** <http://www.oup.com/us/?view=usa> which has maintained its output of titles in the last five years this pressure has posed particular challenges for the fundamental gatekeeping function the **OUP** charter mandates that the **Press** perform. Even as bundling and “big deals” have siphoned larger and larger percentages of library budgets away from books, what has not changed is the fundamental role and responsibility of a university press to record scholarship and research—and, relatedly, the position the academic book has occupied in the tenure and academic credentializing process.

Nor have the basic costs involved in creating and selling a first-rate academic book decreased. In fact, one might argue that, as initial print runs have gone down, the per unit cost of publishing an academic book has risen. While technological change has certainly resulted in some economies, books must still be edited (often developmentally and structurally edited, always copyedited), designed, typeset, manufactured, marketed, publicized, and sold.

Then, there are the invisible costs of scholarly publishing. Consider just one. Every year **OUP** spends hundreds of thousands of dollars vetting manuscripts that do not survive the process of peer review and that will never see the light of day. And, those manuscripts that are accepted for publication are often highly specialized works with initial print runs in the low hundreds. To describe the financial return on such titles as modest is an understatement. However, as a press with an unwavering commitment to publish the best scholarship, regard-

less of its market value, **OUP** remains one of only two university presses—the other being **Cambridge University Press**—still publishing large numbers of books almost exclusively to narrow vectors of the academic library market.

Why Continue Publishing as We Do?

So, why then do we keep doing it? Why do we publish books that often languish for years on a library shelf before being touched by human hand? There are any number of abstract, noble responses frequently invoked to answer this question. Herewith a few.

Intellectual, literary, and artistic value are not always apparent to the contemporary marketplace.

This assertion is normally followed by a striking historical example or supportive anecdote, such as the posthumous recognition of **Van Gogh’s** genius or the fact that each of **Cormac McCarthy’s** books sold fewer and fewer copies, in the low thousands, until *All the Pretty Horses* took off, and with it, his entire backlist. While there is of course much to this line of argument, the inherent risk is that it can easily create a climate once described to me as “the tyranny of the anecdote,” whereby the mere prospect of turning down a successful book serves to paralyze.

University presses are niche publishers by nature. This is an oft-cited answer. We do what niche publishers do, plain and simple, and that entails publishing to niches.

University presses enrich the landscape of ideas, namely by providing deep background to contemporary issues. This is one of the most obvious reasons for why we continue to publish as we do. For instance, books acquired by university presses long before September 11, 2001 suddenly became bestsellers in the wake of that terrible day, providing much-needed context and texture. These included: *Twin Towers: The Life of New York City’s World Trade Center* by **Angus Kress Gillespie**, (**Rutgers University Press**), *Jihad: The Rise of Militant Islam in Central Asia* by **Ahmed Rashid** (**Yale University Press**), *The New Jackals: Ramzi Yousef, Osama bin Laden and the Future of Terrorism* by **Simon Reeve** (**Northeastern University Press**), and *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* by **Bernard Lewis** (**Oxford University Press**).



As an aside, one of the disconcerting side effects of this frenzy for relevant scholarship is the tendency of commercial presses to overpay dramatically for books, books that would once have likely been published by university presses. After a fine, but limited book recently went to a commercial house for an ungodly advance, a colleague of mine whimsically muttered, “Another drunken sailor tottering about on the history waterfront...”

These are all solid answers but don’t necessarily speak to the reason **OUP** continues to publish such a large number of titles. We do so because we believe in our fundamental mission of disseminating refereed scholarship to the academic and, when appropriate, to the broader world, but also because we believe that we are currently in one of the most extraordinary “pockets” of technological dissonance in human history. Once we emerge from this pocket, books, currently sidelined, will soon find their way back to center field, if not necessarily solely as print books, per se.

Let me explain in the form of three questions. 1) Where is most of the world’s knowledge stored? 2) What do you do today when you are looking for a piece of information? 3) Does **Google**, or for that matter any popular search engine, “see” books? The incontrovertible answers to these questions is 1) Books, 2) **Google**, and 3) No.

So, in a nutshell, we find ourselves at a time when the most powerful search technology in the history of the world is at the fingertips of ever-growing numbers of people. Yet, the greatest reservoir of human knowledge exists outside the scope of this technology. If the Web were a restaurant, books have, to date, been out on the cold sidewalks breathing in on the glass. Worse, and at the risk of torturing the metaphor, the windows of the restaurants are, in fact, one-way mirrors. Not only can the books not get in, but no one inside even knows they’re out there.

Thanks to efforts such as **Amazon’s Search Inside the Book** (<http://www.pandia.com/sw-2003/44-amazon.html>) and the **Google Print** initiative (<http://www.fonerbooks.com/googlea9.htm>), books are becoming visible to both casual Web users and researchers. Books will very soon assume their rightful place as a searchable resource on the Web. When they do, the Web will be a better place for it. The jury’s out on what the impact of this digital unveiling of books will be, but early indicators suggest that the net effect is likely to be at the very least mildly positive for book sales.

But, if the effect is only mildly positive, you might ask: How will this really help struggling university presses? When we take a long, hard look in the mirror, mustn’t we ask ourselves

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whether the book hasn't really lost its punch as a medium? Aren't people simply reading less?

On the one hand, commentators point to the influence of technology and information overload as a causal factor in diminishing our attention span and reducing our ability and desire to read in a sustained fashion. On the other, phenomena such as the resurgence of book clubs in America and the proliferation of bestselling works of non-fiction in recent years, suggest a populace clamoring for compelling literature and reliable, high-quality analysis as an antidote to our info-bit culture and the increasingly flighty nature of television journalism.

What do these divergent factors mean for the future of the book? To arrive at a semblance of an answer to the book's future, we must differentiate between fiction and non-fiction books (and, arguably, even between different levels of non-fiction), since "books" is an impossibly broad and useless term for the purposes of this exercise. Fiction faces challenges all its own and is, by its very nature, a highly unpredictable, mercurial business. By comparison, the publishing of academic non-fiction tends to be more steady and predictable. Leaving fiction out of this discussion all together, let's talk simply about that most often debated off-spring of the academy: the monograph.

The Monograph

If not terminally ill, the monograph is certainly suffering from a seemingly incurable malady. Fewer and fewer monographs sell every year and, even when the steady southward trajectory plateaus for a spell, along comes the latest fiscal crisis or round of state budget cuts to imperil already austere library budgets.

If we can agree that the act of researching and writing about a given topic in an expository, analytical manner over the span of 150-350 pages continues to be the most sensible and viable way to think deeply about a topic, we then must ask ourselves whether the problem lies not with the format, but with the delivery vehicle.

In an information environment fueled by the ability to search over vast regions of the Web, the book *qua* book seems increasingly limited. As librarians are quick to point out, students are visiting the library stacks less and less. Who can argue in support of the fundamental inefficiency of physically trolling through individual volumes to conduct research? If the oft-made distinction between immersive content (reading from beginning to end) and extractive content (consulting portions piecemeal) holds true, the academic monograph as a physical object—free-floating, without a direct link to other scholarly entities and unsearchable save for an embedded index—seems rather unhelpful, even anachronistic.

While any self-respecting publisher will resist the facile notion that "information wants to be free" (a frequently invoked mantra of the "copyleft"), surely we can agree that it would be beneficial to liberate the information contained within a book from the constraints of its covers. Archives such as JSTOR, for instance,

have already demonstrated the formidable research potential of aggregated content. Academic books, and their prospective users, benefit considerably when these books are digitally grouped in a useful and scholar-friendly manner.

Oxford Scholarship Online

To test this hypothesis, Oxford has just launched one of the most ambitious digital projects in its recent history: **Oxford Scholarship Online (OSO)**, an archive soon to include thousands of scholarly books (<http://www.oxfordscholarship.com/oso/public/index.html>).

OSO enables users to search across hundreds of thousands of pages of text through keywords and abstracts of books and their chapters. With this added functionality, these books can then behave, in an online environment, much like journal articles, without losing their organic integrity as a sustained intellectual entity (e.g., a complete book). While OSO is still in its infancy, the early signs are encouraging, as the archive has already garnered several awards for its design and user-friendliness. OSO is being used by a host of academic communities around the world, from Calgary to Melbourne, from Texas to Sweden. Usage figures from subscribing institutions suggest that a wide range of scholarly books are being consulted, arguably affirming the utility of the traditional academic monograph in meeting the needs of faculty and students in this new online format. OSO is also resulting in a dramatic expansion of the audiences who have access to high-level scholarly work, giving further substance to the idea that geographic boundaries impede electronic publishing significantly less than they do print publishing. Specialist institutions, such as religious colleges, are subscribing and making a core collection of religion and theology monographs available. Similarly, universities in Africa and Eastern Europe that would not have traditionally been able to buy these monographs are now subscribing to the entire collection.

OUP is also engaged in a research project, funded by the **Andrew W. Mellon Foundation**, intended to explore the feasibility of a multi-publisher online archive consisting of university press "deep backlist" content. **The Online Resource Center for Humanities (TORCH)** <http://www.libraryjournal.com/ar->

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users are to take advantage of highly functional electronically produced and delivered information. Through this statement, the **ICOLC** continues to reflect the dynamic nature of information services to libraries and the need for library consortia to influence the practices of the vendor community on a global basis. This update is initially endorsed by over 50 consortia in 12 countries. More are expected as consortia complete their review and approval processes. The complete Update and endorser's list can be found at www.library.yale.edu/consortia/2004currentpractices.html


This news from the TRULY INCREDIBLE

<http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA415369> hopes to draw university presses, librarians, and researchers into conversations to discern the most viable model for such an undertaking.

The Future of Monographs

Even as we are constantly—nervously, excitedly—projecting our future and indeed the future of scholarly communication, it seems appropriate to close with a publishing principle that is deeply counterintuitive but absolutely core to the university press enterprise, namely: Quality doesn't always sell. Good academic books often appeal only to a very small cross-section of scholars within a particular discipline. And, often you simply must publish these books anyway.

At **Oxford University Press**, we make a conscious effort not to conflate the intellectual value of a given work with its commercial potential. I suspect most readers of serious non-fiction would be staggered at the size of the market for even those academic books geared at the general reader, largely because we still equate high-profile print publicity with automatic sales. In fact, every university press publisher has a story (or several) of a book that was favorably reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review* or the *Washington Post* or *USA Today*, and yet did not sell out its modest first printing of 2,000 copies. (Recently, an **Oxford** book, priced at \$35, was named an *Atlantic Monthly* Book of the Year, in addition to receiving a number of other glowing reviews and benefiting from a vigorous advertising and promotion campaign. All told, the book sold fewer than 700 copies in North America.)

In closing, even as we grapple with harsh realities both old and new, if we surrender our role as advocates for ideas, as champions for authors and their work, as purveyors of the counterintuitive, the provocative, the unpopular, we risk reducing ourselves to aggregators or formatters, to a future in which we are a much smaller link in the information chain than we should by rights represent. And, we must safeguard against that tendency, even as we try to invent the future, as we debate the virtues of XML vs. PDF, as we ponder institutional repositories and e-reserves, as we pore over supply chain reports and inventory spreadsheets. The core work of publishing is aided by all these tasks but it must never be replaced by them. 

Lyman Newlin. **Paul Negri** will take over **Dover Publications** after the retirement of current president **Clarence Strowbridge** retires on Oct. 1.

The American Theological Library Association (ATLA), a not-for-profit association of theological libraries and librarians, is pleased to announce the appointment of **Margot J. Lyon** as its Director of Business Development. Most recently, Ms. Lyon was Director of Business Development and Marketing at **Probe Group, LLC**, a market-research consultancy.

Simon Dessain (currently COO) has been appointed Chief Executive of **Ingenta PLC**. **Mark Rowse** (founder and currently CEO) is taking up a non-executive position on the board. Watch for more news in *ATG* Dec.04/Jan.05.

That's all we have room for right now! See you in Charleston! 